

5. GRASSLANDS PARK PURCHASE

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The purpose of this report is to update the committee on the purchase of 159ha of the Shipleys property in the Rural 6 zone of the Proposed City Plan. This zone corresponds with the area known as the Canterbury Plains Grasslands Park.

BACKGROUND

In 1993 an ecological survey of Christchurch district was carried out to find and evaluate the key areas of high nature conservation value.

Parts of the McLeans Island area were found to have amongst the highest nature conservation qualities in the city on a par with Riccarton Bush and parts of the Port Hills.

Further detailed survey work confirmed the area's importance as a biological remnant of national significance.

The principal characteristics and values of this area are:

- The pre-European vegetation of much of the Canterbury Plains was a mosaic of woodlands of kanuka, kowhai & cabbage tree:
- These lowland, outwash plains vegetation associations now occur nowhere else in New Zealand; they are therefore unique and characteristic or representative of Canterbury.
- After farming settlement, some areas survived in a semi-natural state, because they were on such poor, stony or dry land that they were not worth developing. A few tiny reserves, such as Eyrewell and Bankside, were established in the 1970s. However, these have become degraded.
- Christchurch City contains one of the largest contiguous areas of these dry plains grasslands at McLeans Island.
- The nearly 400 indigenous vascular plants growing wild in Christchurch City represent about 15% of the total New Zealand flora, and the dryland ecosystems support about 18% of our City's total plant biodiversity.
McFarlane (1999) has recorded over 250 invertebrate species in these communities. Characteristic birds (oystercatchers) and reptiles (skinks) also utilise the unique grassland habitats.
- In the past 5-10 years there has been a renewed and increased rate of attrition of these threatened ecosystems across the plains. New technologies and market opportunities have placed new pressures on this land. Some management practices are resulting in weed spread, excessive exotic grass growth, loss of species and loss of the broad open landscape experience.

A number of measures were then undertaken by the City Council to protect this biological and landscape asset and evaluate means by which this relic of pre-European Christchurch and Canterbury could be experienced by the public.

RURAL 6 ZONE AND ECOLOGICAL HERITAGE SITES

The Rural 6 zone was instigated to provide greater protection to the landscape qualities of the grassland part of the McLeans Island area. The zone includes areas of indigenous grassland and shrub vegetation of unique ecological significance to Canterbury and Christchurch. The highest quality ecological areas were listed in the City Plan as Ecological Heritage Sites. Measures to protect vegetation in these sites within the zone are incorporated in the rules. The open and expansive landscape is also unique because it represents a relatively unmodified part of the plains close to the centre of Christchurch. The purpose of the zone is to enable management of activities so they are compatible with the natural, particularly ecological, values of the area and the maintenance of a predominantly open landscape. Accordingly, the zone is suitable for the current use of extensive pastoral farming, and suitable recreational activities associated with the adjoining McLeans Island area.

SHIPLEY PROPERTY PURCHASE

In May 2001 the City Council approved purchase of approximately 159ha of the freehold properties owned by the Shipleys for a Scenic Reserve. The land included one of the most important Rural 6 Ecological Heritage Sites and is within the boundary of the Canterbury Plains Grassland Park proposal. (See Appendix 1 attached for location).

CANTERBURY PLAINS GRASSLAND PARK

“A proposal to capture the experience and broad vistas of formally extensive primeval grasslands, shrublands and woodlands on the Canterbury Plains”

A concept plan for a “Grassland park” was developed as a possible non-regulatory tool to facilitate protection of the area, alongside the rules in the Proposed City Plan. The concept document was presented to the joint CCC/CRC committee in December 1997, at which it was agreed that the proposal be adopted in principle and a working party be established to investigate cost, timing and public consultation over the project and report back to the committee. This particular committee was the first to be presented with the concept plan, as the majority of the land within the zone is vested in the Canterbury Regional Council (Ecan) for flood control purposes and is leased out for grazing. The working party was not established because it would have pre-empted the outcome of submissions and possible references to the Rural 6 Zone. Implementation of this vision was to be long term and depended on the collaboration of Environment Canterbury and the City Council, purchase of some private land, and accommodation of the needs of the ECAN leaseholders.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The City Council's current priority is to resolve any outstanding references on the Rural 6 Zone. Successful resolution of these will allow the City and Environment Canterbury to progress formal discussions on the options for facilitating the Grassland Park and for discussing these with leaseholders. A joint approach to development of the park concept by the two Councils would ensure that the proposal eventually contributes to an open space system of benefit to residents of the city and wider Canterbury alike.

Chairman's

Recommendation: For information